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Selling the liberal arts degree in England: unique students, generic skills and mass higher education

Kathryn Telling

University of Manchester, UK

Abstract

This article examines a series of well-documented changes in post-war English higher education: the massification of, and increased differentiation within, the system, as well as changing relationships between credentials, skills and incomes. It offers an account of the new liberal arts degrees rapidly emerging at both elite and non-elite universities in England, explaining these as a response to, and negotiation of, an ever-changing higher-education landscape. Through an analysis of the promotional websites of the 17 English liberal arts degrees offered in the 2016-17 academic year, the article links their emergence to broader trends, while insisting that there are crucial differences in the ways in which elite and non-elite universities use new degrees to negotiate the higher education landscape.

Key words: credentialism, elitism, graduate labour market, graduate skills, higher education, liberal arts, massification, 'soft' skills

Kathryn Telling, Department of Sociology, Arthur Lewis Building, University of Manchester, M13 9PL. kathryn.telling@manchester.ac.uk

We are not an employment agency; all we can do is to give you a grounding in the art of mixing with your fellow men, to tell you what to expect from life and give you an outward manner and inward poise, an old prescription from the eighteenth century which we call a classical education, an education which confers the infrequent virtues of good sense and good taste (Connolly, 2008 [1938]: 258)

Introduction

When it comes to higher education in England, it seems, the only constant is change. Universities are consistently impelled to adapt to the shifting sands of government policy, industrial needs and public mood. But how do different sorts of higher education institutions (HEIs), negotiating very different conditions in terms of prestige and mission, manage this change?

This article examines a series of higher education shifts in England, ongoing but which can broadly be traced back to the post-war period: the direction of travel from an elite to a mass system; toward increasing differentiation and a conception of institutions as competitors; the rise of the credential society and credential inflation; and a changing discourse around employability. Throughout these shifts it is arguably the *humanities* disciplines which have most struggled to assert themselves as central to higher education's mission. Such changes have been well-documented as well as critiqued. This paper, however, uses an increasingly popular negotiation of higher educational change – the English liberal arts degree – as a lens through which to examine a set of tensions at the heart of broader shifts, especially as they relate to the humanities. If HEIs are increasingly turning to *North American* models of education, what does this tell us about what is happening to English higher education more broadly? And given that different HEIs must manage very different conditions, how do such differences manifest themselves in the ways competing institutions conceptualise the liberal arts?

As of the 2016-17 academic year, there will be 17 (HEIs) in England marketing degrees branded as ‘liberal arts’.¹ Irrespective of attempts to associate liberal arts degrees with an Ancient Greek liberal education suitable for free men (constituting the ‘trivium’ of linguistic arts and the ‘quadrivium’ of scientific arts), discussed below, the concept of liberal arts is much more closely associated with a North American tradition which has flourished, in particular, in small private colleges. Here the liberal arts are broadly characterized by the principle that general education should precede technical specialism, considered appropriate to the higher levels of undergraduate education, or even consigned to graduate school. This focus on general education leads to a number of specific features of a North American liberal arts degree. They are non-vocational, attempting to impart generic skills rather than those specific to a particular sphere of work. Although there is a tendency to associate the liberal arts with the humanities (which Harpham [2011] has identified as a curiously American disciplinary formation), they tend to be more broadly interdisciplinary than this, with students required to take science components throughout their degrees. In conjunction with a notable disciplinary eclecticism, liberal arts degrees often contain some notion of a core curriculum of general education shared by all. Pedagogically there is a focus on small-group teaching, while philosophically the liberal arts approach often stresses the idea of preparing citizens for civic life by pursuing a holistic teaching method which does not separate intellectual from moral and political development. This concept of a democratic function for the liberal arts sits in tension with a connected but more elitist idea of liberal arts as providing those with the leisure to pursue a general education with a number of the ‘infrequent virtues’, as in Cyril Connolly’s invocation above, suitable for leadership roles.

In its recent translation, not only to England but to many parts of northern and central Europe, the liberal arts degree is both continuing a number of these traditions, and departing

from them. In the analysis which follows I try to explicate what is happening when the idea of the liberal arts is translated to the English higher education context. Through discourse analysis of all webpages associated with all 17 English liberal arts degrees, I explore a series of tensions which animate the attempts of HEIs to promote their liberal arts degrees. Initially I look at the tension between liberal arts degrees as traditional (especially the link to Ancient Greece) as against their promotion (and a conception of their students) as innovative. Next the concept of employability, and its sometimes paradoxical relation to the idea of education for its own sake, is explored. Even while the importance of intellectual curiosity as an intrinsic good is stressed, the discussion of this intrinsic good is almost invariably connected to the job market. Here intellectual qualities are re-described as marketable commodities. The article then goes on to discuss this idea of the unique, intellectually curious polymath as ideal liberal arts student, and how this sits in tension with both generic descriptions of this student and the generic (or soft) skills liberal arts degrees provide. Finally, I turn to the question of elitism, the elite student and the elite university, and examine how this works both with and against an idea of the liberal arts as a reinvigoration of democracy.

Throughout the discussion, the article aims to explore two wider questions. Firstly, I am interested in how *different types* of HEI promote liberal arts degrees. Although at times the claims made will be broadly true across the sector, at others differences will be indicated between the eight old, six post-war and three new HEIs now advertising such degrees. This is especially true where questions of the relation between elitism and the reinvigoration of democracy are discussed. Secondly, this question of the problem of elitism associated with the liberal arts degree is related to a broader debate about the elitist functions of England's mass higher education system. Here the argument is that, in a higher education system now considered

to be in perpetual crisis (Hillman, 2016), elite HEIs increasingly innovate, but precisely to conserve an historical advantage. Since much of that advantage comes through the rather nebulous (and difficult to quantify) concept of *prestige* (Brewer, Gates and Goldman, 2002), this notion is consistently invoked even while innovation is also stressed. I argue that this is one way for elite HEIs to maintain an advantage within a mass higher education system.

Methods

The following discussion is based upon discourse analysis of the webpages of the 17 HEIs promoting liberal arts degrees in the 2016-17 academic year. HEIs were identified using the course finder of the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) website, and institutions were categorised into ‘old’, ‘post-war’ and ‘new’. All publicly-available webpages pertaining to the liberal arts degree were included (amongst other things: course descriptions, module and assessment summaries, descriptions of entry requirements, possible occupational outcomes, and testimonials and diaries from current and former students).

The approximately 90,000 words thus collected were manually coded for emerging themes and a grid created to cross-reference themes as they related to different institutions. The themes discussed in this article specifically concern competing conceptions of a humanities education which existed in tension throughout the webpages (namely tradition-innovation, employability-intellectual curiosity, unique individuals-generic skills, and democracy-elite). Other themes emerged and will be discussed in further publications.

Before turning to the analysis proper, the article first explicates some of this broader context: the *massification* of higher education, increasing *differentiation* between HEIs, and the

rise of *credentialism*. In all three respects, the English higher education context can be said to be getting closer to its US counterpart, and this may be one reason for an increasing similarity between the types of degrees offered by US and English HEIs.

Massification, differentiation and credentialism

Although the shift from an elite to a mass higher education system is by no means linear or straightforward to read (Scott, 1995), what we do know is that between 1985 and 2010 the number of people participating in British higher education increased from one million to 2.5 million (Temple, 2015). The early ideology of massification rested on concepts of social mobility and meritocracy more broadly at work in post-war social reforms, and which were explicitly invoked in the Robbins Report of 1963 advocating expansion of the sector (Scott, 2014). That other seismic shake-up, John Major's relaxing of the conditions placed on the title of university in 1992, likewise referred to the principle of social mobility. The changes have even been attributed to Major's personal dislike for the elitism tied up in the previously binary (university and polytechnic) system (Brown and Carasso, 2013).

Although both the post-war and the 1992 reformers envisaged their innovations as breaking down divisions between institutions and creating a more homogenous (and so less elitist) system, conversely increased differentiation was the result. Just as the post-war universities began to distinguish themselves, in their governmental structures, burgeoning radical political scenes and even in their brutalist architecture, from the perceived stuffiness and pomposity of the old universities, so those old universities increasingly presented themselves as, by dint of that very stuffiness and pomposity, fundamentally more prestigious and indeed serious

than the upstart institutions. And no sooner had the Further and Higher Education Act come into effect in 1992, than the elite universities began to distinguish themselves as the Russell Group. Thus the very processes of massification, encouraged by successive governments with a view to the principles of social mobility, homogenisation and anti-elitism, seem invariably to lead to a retrenchment of elitist divisions and sensibilities.

In 1979, Randall Collins offered an explanation for similar processes he noted in the American post-war 'credential society'. Arguing against the 'technocratic' idea that increasing numbers of American citizens were attaining ever higher levels of qualification because technological advances required ever higher degrees of competence, Collins instead claimed that credentials function as currency on a market. Whilst having no intrinsic meaning (they do not, for the most part, signify any great level of technical competence), credentials signify membership of a closed group. They demonstrate a general level of social and cultural competence but, more than this, are marks of distinction which signify class membership: people with particular sorts of credentials are 'our kind of people'. Collins clearly draws on Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964], 1990 [1970]) critical sociology of education here, but criticises Bourdieu for failing to explain the specific process by which credential inflation takes place. Collins is specifically concerned with the *mechanism* by which cultural currency such as an educational qualification comes to take on such social significance. Culture becomes 'money' to be exchanged only at that point when cultural organisations quantify and measure *how much* culture people have. The value of a credential (that is culture, quantified) in the credential society is therefore determined by market conditions (supply, demand, competition and inflation) rather than intrinsic worth.

For Collins, what has been key in post-war American society is the growth of political (as opposed to productive) labour; that is, the increase of white-collar jobs or, as he puts it, the installation of leisure at the heart of work. Such work is not technically complex, nor does it add to the sum total of capital produced. Instead it organises the *distribution* of ever-increasing (and increasingly complex) capital. Indeed, were the need for technical competence to be the primary driver in the credential society, one would expect technical and highly specialised professions to be those which are the best paid. Instead, ‘the most important routes to power and income are through the realms of organizational politics and administration’ (Collins, 1979: 49-50). In order to make decisions about who is best placed to fill such important distributive functions, the credential society requires to know not levels of technical competence, but rather who has required those ‘soft skills’ of organisation, administration and leadership most prized in white-collar work. Such soft skills are not only those associated with a university education. They are also inextricably tied up with social class.

Gerbrand Tholen (2016) has recently applied and extended Collins’s theory to the current UK job market. In a mass higher education context where there is no longer a clear link between skills, jobs and incomes, social position is increasingly assured by ‘symbolic closure’. By maintaining a privileged control over the social meanings of credentials and skills, the elite are able to reproduce symbolic dominance. In the supposed ‘knowledge economy’, groups no longer close themselves off merely by restricting access to resources and opportunities (Weber’s [1978 (1922)] ‘social closure’), but crucially monopolise the right to determine the symbolic meaning of credentials. Thus, irrespective of processes of social mobility (the massification of higher education, ever greater numbers of people with ever higher levels of education, and centralised attempts to homogenise higher education provision), an elite will maintain its position by

distinguishing, for instance, between 2.2s and 2.1s (and increasingly 2.1s and firsts), undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and, crucially, differences in prestige between different institutions. In this way elitism remains central to the functioning of a mass system.²

Since the 1990s in England, the ideology of massification has shifted from one of meritocracy to the free market. Successive policy drives since the 1990s, but especially those from the Conservative-led governments in place since 2010, have stressed higher education as a private rather than a public good, the role of students as rationally calculating consumers, and a conception of HEIs as competing businesses. In the recent government white paper ‘Success as a knowledge economy’ (BIS, 2016) setting out reforms to higher education, two of the three general chapter headings were ‘Competition’ and ‘Choice’. In such a context, notions of a level playing field and of homogenising the structure of higher education provision give way to ideas of choice, competing capitals, and ‘gaming the system’ (Jones, 2016).

The move from meritocratic to free-market credentialism clearly moves the English higher education system closer to its US counterpart. Recent suggestions that European higher education might be reinvigorated by a turn to the liberal arts have made positive allusions to this ‘Americanisation’ of the system. Marijk van der Wende (2011) notes that, as European governments turn away from attempts to engineer higher education as a motor for social mobility and instead perceive it as a market in which consumers make rational choices, liberal arts will grow as just such a rational choice. In particular, it is a rational choice for elite institutions to focus on non-vocational degrees acculturating elite students into the soft skills required in elite professions.

While there are clear similarities among different northern European systems of higher education, it is worth noting important distinctions between the relation of soft skills training to

elite occupations in different national contexts. As Marte Mangset (2015) has shown through her comparative study of the French, British and Norwegian civil service, the general humanities education of the typical British bureaucrat has little in common with the highly specialised social sciences training of their Norwegian counterpart. Having said this, Mangset found that Norwegian as much as French and British civil servants *did* stress their soft skills, irrespective of the generalist or specialist nature of their education.

In the remainder of the article, the specific ways in which liberal arts degrees are being promoted at old, post-war and new HEIs will be discussed. By exploring a series of tensions which animate the promotional attempts of these diverse institutions, the article examines the links between specific institutional configurations and the broader political context in which they occur.

Tradition and innovation

In developing new liberal arts degrees, HEIs on the one hand stress that their degrees (and by extension the students considering them) are somehow innovate, pioneering or brave; yet on the other, make clear a link to an Ancient Greek tradition, sometimes alluded to with a degree of hyperbole:

'In Ancient Greece, liberal arts were essential for a citizen in order to take an active part in civic life' (post-war).

'At _____ we retrieve the classical philosophical mission to search for first principles and truth' (new).

The insistence on the liberal arts degree as ancient, and as thereby linked to highbrow concepts like citizenship and democracy, is a borrowing from the US context. Indeed, in the long

tradition of jeremiads defending liberal arts from its technicist and instrumentalist detractors, the importance of liberal arts' Athenian ancestry, in particular the Socratic method, is consistently invoked (see, for instance, Bloom, 1987; Nussbaum, 2012; Roche, 2010). Malcolmson, Myers and O'Connell (1996) could go so far as to claim that the Ancient Greek tradition provided 'the most fully human form of education' (18).

The notion of Athenian citizenship as central to the liberal arts tradition is in complex relation to the problem of elitism. Margaret Ferguson (2003) notes that in Martha Nussbaum's (1999) invocation of the history of philosophy as being fundamentally opposed to that of sophistry, she neglects the historical opposition between philosophy as 'civilised' (that is, Athenian) and sophistry as 'barbarian' (that is, foreign). The idea of the enlightened, liberally educated Athenian citizen rests heavily on the exclusion of non-citizens: foreigners, women and slaves. And even without these historical problems, the concept of 'preparation for citizenship' as the purpose of a liberal arts education has been critiqued as a hyperbolic claim both for what higher education is able to achieve, and indeed for what it should aim toward (Fish, 2008). As Colm Kelly (2012) puts it, 'Forming citizens for freedom is a heavy load for educationalists to believe they bear' (58).

Although the link to an Ancient Greek tradition is invoked by English HEIs marketing new liberal arts degrees, there is nonetheless a tendency to stress the newness and innovation of the degrees. Almost all liberal arts sites use the words 'new', 'pioneering', 'innovative' or 'exciting' to describe their degrees. The new liberal arts degree is presented as a way of bypassing some of the more old-fashioned or even dull aspects of a traditional degree: one post-war HEI's promotional video stresses that 'you won't be stuck in the lecture theatre' over a visual of bored-looking students in a traditional lecture hall.

New HEIs tend to focus on the institution *itself* as demonstrating innovation and a pioneering spirit:

'It is a very challenging time for any University in the UK to support a retrieval of liberal arts education' (new).

This is in marked contrast to old and post-wars' focus on the pioneering qualities considered a prerequisite to be a liberal arts *student*. We can explain such a difference with reference to the distinction between recruiting and selecting institutions (Zimdars 2016). While recruiting institutions must compete for students with other, similarly positioned HEIs in order to fill places, selecting institutions conversely attract many more applications than the number of student places available. Selective institutions are therefore able to stress the elite nature of the liberal arts student themselves – their unusual levels of intellectual curiosity and their pioneering spirit – as opposed to the attempt to present the HEI as the innovator in the promotional materials of the new institutions:

'You should be able to acquire, analyse and communicate knowledge, be motivated and intellectually curious, and not afraid to try new things' (old).

The pioneering liberal arts student at the elite institution is therefore one prepared to take calculated and rational *risks*. This concept of the rationally calculating consumer choosing a route to the future on the free market is one consistently invoked in government rhetoric. Here, although there is always risk involved, the implication is that higher education is broadly a safe bet, since average earnings increase with the attainment of a first degree, the requirement to pay back the student loan only emerges once earnings have risen beyond a particular threshold, and so on. The appeal to the *average* personal benefit in such government rhetoric, however, masks the very real inequalities between different students in terms of both how likely they are to attain

a particular salary and their relation to risk. For many young people higher education is inextricably tied up with risk and, far from being rationally calculating consumers, these students' futures remain largely unknowable (Brynin, 2012; Williams, 2013).

In their invocation of the innovative and pioneering student, a number of HEIs in fact quite explicitly take risk into account:

'I know that this can be a stressful time, especially as you weigh various course offers and try to imagine the routes your life can take. We want to encourage you to take risks, to dream big, and to make your decision out of hope and determination, not fear' (post-war).

Here the risk discourse which frames much debate about higher education is reimagined as the pioneering spirit necessary to succeed. As Stephen Ball (2003) has shown in his work on the educational choices of middle-class parents, risk is simultaneously central to the ideology of entrepreneurialism and choice which serves the middle class so well, *and* to a specific set of middle-class anxieties about an unknowable future. This dual aspect of risk society – its production of anxieties as well as the presentation of risk-taking as somehow the solution to such anxieties – is very clearly invoked by a number of more elite HEIs when promoting liberal arts:

'In our rapidly changing world, a Liberal Arts education prepares you to adapt to jobs that are just coming into being or to invent new ones' (post-war).

'It will provide the adaptability and flexibility you need in our rapidly changing world' (old).

'The world of work is changing very fast and there are many views on what this world will be like in a few years' time. One thing seems to be clear though: we are preparing people today for jobs that we do not yet know exist' (old).

The risk associated with a changing labour market is, in keeping with broader trends, individualised here: it may be the whole world which is 'rapidly changing', but the onus is on individuals, and not governments or society, to manage such risk. Crucially, the value of the risk-

taking liberal arts student in the unknowable future is intimately tied up with questions of employability and the job market.

The paradox of employability

The connection between a liberal arts education and employability is one that has long vexed critics and supporters of the tradition alike. When, in 1937, a number of prominent liberal arts educators completely overhauled the curriculum at then-struggling St John's College in Maryland, to focus entirely on the so-called Great Books (in the humanities but also the sciences), a number of objections were made. Sidney Hook (1946), in fact a defender of the liberal arts tradition, criticised the St John's experiment on a number of grounds, but not least that the link between general education and competence in the workplace was assumed rather than demonstrated. As Stefan Collini (2012) has much more recently noted,

Trying to decide what the demand is likely to be for a new widget may have *something* in common with trying to reconstruct a history of farming practices from thirteenth-century manorial records, but it does seem an awfully roundabout route. (142; original emphasis)

For those new HEIs promoting liberal arts degrees, what is often stressed is the intellectual value of the degree as against, at least initially, the more quotidian concern of employment:

'We believe that there are students who wish to study for the sake of studying, even in these difficult financial times; students who share Tolstoy's view that "without knowing what I am and why I am here, life is impossible." In offering Liberal Arts again at _____, we hope to show that education can be more, much more, than just a training and preparation for a job' (new).

Even here the rhetoric of employability seeps in, but it lacks a good deal of the instrumentalism of more elite institutions we will look at below:

‘We hope that our graduates will... as Newman said, “be placed in that state or intellect in which he [or she] can take up any [job] for which he has a taste or special talent with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and success”’ (new).

Again, differences between selecting and recruiting institutions may account for the apparent caution with which less prestigious HEIs make claims about the value of their degrees. Certainly, the link made rather subtly here between occupation and the ‘ease’ inculcated by a liberal education is, in general, made much more confidently by elite HEIs. The soft skills of team-working, leadership, communication and critical thinking, along with the general culture provided by an adequate versing in the humanities, are often alluded to. The below quotation from Apple founder Steve Jobs is not infrequently used in this context:

‘Technology alone is not enough. It’s technology married with the liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our hearts sing’ (post-war).

Culture and employability are here presented not as antithetical, nor even as merely coincidental to one another; rather, it is the very ‘softness’ of the liberal arts training that leads to its value in the labour market. Intellectual curiosity, polymathy, the innovative and entrepreneurial spirit and a concern for self-knowledge, self-mastery and an ethical existence – in short the intellectual life itself – is hereby instrumentalised.

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007 [1999]) have shown how, since the middle of the 1970s, the innovative spirit of counter-cultural movements has been incorporated into a modern form of capitalism which asks not merely that workers be motivated by the Protestant work ethic or the Fordist ideology of efficiency, as in previous generations, but that they exhibit a passion for their work, understood as an ethical project. The new capitalist worker is thus motivated beyond any financial incentive to invest on a personal level in justifications for the work, to be creative, and go beyond what is required merely to ‘get the job done’. Such a ‘spirit’ is, for

Boltanski and Chiapello, an ideology both in the sense of a large-scale social structure exerting force on individuals, and a *sincerely* felt subjective drive. Any attempt to parse sincere intellectual curiosity, creativity and ethical drive from ‘mere’ instrumentality, efficiency and market processes will miss the way in which the new spirit of capitalism binds these apparently contradictory forces together. As one frequently asked questions page on the liberal arts webpages of an elite HEI puts it:

‘Q. I’m not clear: is this a course aimed at the future job market or at people who really want in-depth study?’

A. We think Arts and Sciences can do both’ (old).

Liberal arts are explicitly presented as a way to align the ‘training’ provided by higher education with the needs of employers in the move from an industrial to a knowledge economy (Etkowitz, Ranga and Dzisah, 2012). It is the softness and flexibility of the skills associated with liberal arts degrees which make them particularly aligned with the new spirit of capitalism. The difficulty which promoters of liberal arts face is that such skills, precisely because they suggest flexibility, adaptability and intellectual polymathy (or even dilettantism), are notably *generic*.

Unique individuals with generic skills

‘You’ll be an excellent communicator who can present and defend your views clearly, and you’ll be confident working independently or as a team. You’ll also have strong research skills and highly developed skills of analysis and interpretation’ (old).

In the above list of skills that a graduate from a liberal arts degree at an elite university is said to have achieved, we see a particularly stark invocation of the highly generic nature of soft skills. This might describe many people with any number of different degrees, and indeed a large number without. What is alluded to here is what Tholen, Relly, Warhurst and Commander

(2016) call ‘graduateness’, ‘a collective reference that includes soft skills and generic skills such as time management, commitment, organisation, independence, roundedness and life experience’ (Tholen, 2016: 11). In a context where it is such generic skills, rather than specific levels of technical competence, which are prized, what marks out the elite graduate is a *pre-existing* tendency toward the desired personal traits of innovation, creativity, curiosity, polymathy and the pioneering spirit. For those HEIs which select rather than recruiting students, the generic nature of the soft skills engendered by a liberal arts degree does not preclude an appeal to a highly individualised, in fact unique, liberal arts student, whose desirable personal qualities largely precede acceptance onto the course:

‘we will be looking for students... with the intellectual curiosity to want to explore new subject areas and extra-curricular experiences’ (old).

‘Liberal arts is for true intellects who want to indulge their curiosity for knowledge’ (post-war).

The prospective liberal arts student is asked not merely to exhibit cultural capital (even before beginning the degree) here, but to demonstrate that they have, in Philip Brown, Anthony Hesketh and Sara Williams’s (2003) words, converted this into *personal* capital. Here the elite universities appear to work in analogous ways to elite employers, who increasingly stress that applicants should already exhibit that personal capital required to be fit for more specialist training on the job (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

The focus on pre-existing qualities amongst selecting institutions also feeds into a meritocratic story elite HEIs often tell about the students they select. Such a story tends not to reflect on how such qualities are inculcated (or indeed measured), as we will see below. It is also in marked contrast to those non-elite institutions that *recruit* students, and so tend to focus on

those skills which will be imparted through the intervention of the degree itself, rather than preceding it:

'You will learn to view the world from fresh perspectives, becoming more independent, mature, versatile and confident in the process' (new).

The *uniqueness* of the elite liberal arts student (the unique way in which they will develop the generic skills required by the labour market) is also invoked through reference to the unique, 'bespoke' nature of the degree itself:

'Students create a bespoke programme' (old).

'You will build a bespoke pathway of study' (post-war).

'The wide range of my interests in [sic] reflected in my programme of study, which shows everyone else, including employers, what makes me different, and how I stand out from the crowd' (student testimonial, old).

Finally here, there is a focus on the unusualness of having a liberal arts degree, this pioneering course for pioneering students, at all. Crucially, this is what will allow liberal arts graduates to *stand out* on the crowded job market:

'you will be challenged to develop a unique set of skills that will make you stand out in the increasingly competitive job market' (old).

'A Liberal Arts and Sciences degree will set you apart in a competitive job market' (old).

'Set yourself apart' (new).

'A successful person must have a spark of creativity which will set them apart, something which is imparted by studying Liberal Arts' (post-war).

'your broad knowledge and research expertise will help you stand out from graduates of more specialised degrees' (post-war).

'This course is for those who aren't afraid to set themselves apart from the mainstream and to challenge the rules of education itself' (student testimonial, old).

'In addition to your subject disciplines, you will learn... [inter alia] how to present yourself as an interesting, well-rounded individual' (new).

(In this last the question of whether one is likely to become an interesting individual *in fact* is rather left hanging.) As in the crowd's response to Brian's insistence that they are all individuals (*en masse*, 'Yes, we are all individuals!') in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, the purported uniqueness of the liberal arts student is at least in tension with their generic 'graduateness' and the homogenising way in which HEIs present all liberal arts students as the same sort of unique individual. Clearly this concern with the unique student feeds into the broader problem of elitism associated with the liberal arts: that while such degrees may stress the role of general education in civic life, they also tend to appeal to a particular demographic of student.

Democracy and the elite

Like their US counterparts, English HEIs must manage a particular tension when it comes to the *function* of a liberal education. On the one hand, the concept of acculturating students to the higher intellectual pursuits, or of favouring those students already endowed with a particular intellectual habitus, might lead us to a reading of the liberal arts which stresses some concept of an intellectual elite. In the US this is often framed as 'preparation for leadership'. On the other hand, the idea of the liberal arts is also often justified on the grounds that it will reinvigorate *democracy* by preparing good citizens for civic life. Social justice is at the centre of such claims, as in the following extract:

'You engage with unusual, controversial, and provocative ideas, so that you can use the humanities and social sciences to become critically aware and possess the tools to change the world for the better' (post-war).

As with other tensions which animate English incarnations of the liberal arts, different types of HEI present the problem in different ways. New HEIs tend to stress liberal arts as what

can invigorate the institution itself, and this reinvigoration as key to a broader contribution to democratic processes. Again, because new HEIs are recruiting rather than selecting institutions (that is, it is students who choose between recruiting institutions, rather than HEIs choosing between students, as at selective HEIs), they stress what is unique and important about the institution rather than its prospective students:

'The challenge we have responded to is to retrieve the tradition of the study of Liberal Arts while at the same time articulating the ways in which it might make a singular contribution to modern undergraduate higher education. The term 'modern' here is essential in making our course distinctive not only against historical manifestations of the Liberal Arts, but also to emphasise our renewed vision of higher education for the modern world' (new).

Here what is alluded to is not merely the role of liberal arts in invigorating higher education, and thereby society more broadly; this new HEI also implicitly distances itself from some more problematic tendencies associated with the liberal arts historically. Although there is an acknowledgement that elitism has been a problem for the tradition, then, there is a concerted effort to stress the capacity for liberal arts to contribute to democratic processes.

The idea of the *unknowable future*, discussed above, is a particular feature of the way in which post-war institutions link the idea of an elite to the democratic functions of the liberal arts. Although the concept of reinvigorating civil society or of 'giving something back' is central here, as for the new HEIs, this is tied to an individualised conception of how particular people with particular skills will flourish in an unknowable future:

'To be able to think as broadly and as deeply as you can is the key to success in this world, the world that's coming into being' (post-war).

The old universities, by contrast, most explicitly and unashamedly invoke an elite, in conjunction with the concept of citizenship. Here society will be reinvigorated precisely by an

elite (a new ‘generation of leaders’) taking a specific role in society (as well as enhancing their own prospects):

‘You must be of the highest intellectual calibre, and we are looking for a commitment to embrace the challenge of a truly cosmopolitan education’ (old).

‘for a new breed of dynamic business, public service, and political leaders’ (old).

Despite an insistence on the importance of general education and critical thinking, at least six old and two post-war HEIs do not accept the soon-to-be-defunct general studies and critical thinking A level. This qualification is routinely discounted amongst prestigious HEIs and especially amongst the most prestigious degrees, such as medicine, when offers of places are made to students, because it is considered academically unrigorous as well as generic. There is a clear class dynamic to the uptake of general studies at A level: in 2004 only 35.7% of independent schools offered the qualification, as opposed to 63.8% of comprehensive schools (Rodeiro 2005). It is difficult to see the exclusion of the A level most clearly resembling the liberal arts degree as much more than the policing of ‘serious study’ and the exercising of a right to determine the social meaning of credentials. As Tholen (2016) has argued, as the link between credentials, skills and income is loosened, the symbolic function of higher education becomes increasingly important. Irrespective, then, of an insistence on disciplinary breadth and flexibility, soft skills training and critical thought as what will help the successful graduate of tomorrow ‘stand out from the crowd’, prestige remains central to beliefs about credentials.

Although the old universities are the most explicit in their appeal to an idea of an intellectual elite, they nonetheless must simultaneously try to take the problematic edge of *elitism* out of their claims. Feeding into a much broader justification of an intellectual elite on meritocratic grounds, old HEIs tend to stress the *natural* capabilities of their desired students:

‘Academically able and naturally inquisitive, our Liberal Arts and Sciences programme is designed to create the next generation of leaders’ (old).

‘_____ students are, by nature, dynamic, busy people with lots of interests both within and outside the classroom’ (old).

Such an appeal to natural ability takes its terms from the assumptions both that prospective students can be unproblematically sifted into those with ‘ability’ and ‘inquisitiveness’ and those without (the uninquisitive student?), and that such perceived differences can be unproblematically attributed to nature. It is also part of an increasing focus on personal qualities, often coded as *talent*, as central to what will allow elite students to stand out in the context of contemporary credential inflation (Brown, Power, Tholen and Allouch, 2016). Irrespective of the widening participation and other initiatives elite HEIs engage in, often with an *explicit* recognition of the role of family circumstance and educational experience in the eventual presentation of ‘ability’ amongst prospective students, they simultaneously and unreflexively draw upon and feed into broader discourses of nature, merit and an intellectual elite.

Conclusion

The movement from an elite to a mass higher education system, from a social-mobility to a marketised conception of meritocracy, and toward an increasingly generic conception of employability, has created significant shifts in the way in which the humanities must present themselves. The emergence of the liberal arts degree in England in the last fifteen years is quite intelligible if we consider the various ways in which English, and indeed European, higher education has steadily been getting closer to its American counterpart (Van der Wende, 2011). In a massified system, and irrespective of the attempts of previous governments to homogenise and democratise the system, an elite differentiates itself. This is all the more true when the notion of

the free market and students as consumers increasingly exists alongside the older ideology of meritocracy. In such a context, a turn to US models is quite understandable. The way that American models are translated into the English context is different, however, for different sorts of HEI.

For those institutions which must recruit students (that is, those which actively compete with one another for students and make significantly more offers to students than will be taken up), the liberal arts are a way of presenting the institution itself as innovative, simultaneously forward-looking and ‘traditional’ and, crucially, as contributing more broadly to something like civil society. For selective institutions, however, it is the prospective liberal arts *student* who is presented as innovative and ‘unique’. Such institutions simultaneously flatter and sift prospective students and, whilst making appeals to a conception of liberal arts as suited to an elite, do not for all that forego the idea of the reinvigoration of democracy to be found more broadly amongst appeals to the liberal arts.

Throughout all of these promotional attempts, a series of tensions must be managed. The idea of the liberal arts as invoking tradition (one of the ways in which HEIs can attribute the degrees with prestige) must be balanced with a concern to present (its current, English) manifestation as new, innovative and pioneering. The idea of the unknowable future is crucial here in positing a need for new, flexible and interdisciplinary degrees. Such flexibility will, it is claimed, be invaluable in our ‘rapidly changing world’. Notably, then, the innovation of the degrees is tied into employability: it is the very non-vocational nature of the courses which makes them, paradoxically, of most use on the labour market. If the skills provided by liberal arts degrees are thereby both ‘soft’ and generic, the liberal arts *student* is presented, particularly at prestigious institutions, as unique.

Not least, and running throughout these other tensions, the promotion of the liberal arts in England must negotiate the tension between an elite and a mass conception of higher education itself. On the one hand, with its concentration on citizenship and the reinvigoration of democracy, the liberal arts degree seems well matched to a mass higher education system. This is certainly what new universities suggest, but all types of HEI make an appeal to this conception of liberal arts as civic engagement. Despite this, the idea of the liberal arts remains tied to the concept of a small group being prepared for leadership and, as Colm Kelly (2012) has argued, ‘it is tempting to move from saying that liberal education is education for freedom, to saying that the majority of people have little taste for such freedom and such education’ (58). This tension between democracy and elitism is not merely a problem for the liberal arts, however. As this article has tried to show, it is a much broader problem for mass systems emerging from elite ones.

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¹ Because education is a devolved matter for the four constituent nations of the United Kingdom, I focus here on the English context.

² Indeed the very concept of post-war social mobility can be construed as a myth: whilst the growth of white-collar jobs presented opportunities for the upper-working class to rise, there was no concomitant downward social mobility amongst the middle class, and the shift in *relative position* between members of different classes was slight (Roberts, 2014). This is what Bourdieu means in his central claim that ‘what the competitive struggle makes everlasting is not different positions, but the difference between positions’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979 [1964]: 96).

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Author biography

Kathryn Telling is a lecturer in the Sociology department at the University of Manchester. She has research interests in the critical sociology of higher education and of knowledge, especially as these relate to social class and gender.